

## SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

# “IT’S A LONG WAY TO MACEDONIA”

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**TEXT:** Acts 16:9-15

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It’s a movie classic: *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*. The movie reminds us that when you travel, your plans can change. If you’re going home to Chicago, you may wind up in Wichita.

The Apostle Paul had travel plans. He wanted to spread the good news of Christ in Asia Minor, but he was blocked, it says in Acts, chapter 16. We don’t know why he was blocked. Maybe the roads were impassible. Maybe he had enemies in Asia Minor. Paul explains it this way: “[We were] forbidden,” he says, “by the Holy Spirit” (v. 6). He knew that God was saying no.

And so Paul took a detour, ending up in Troas, on the coast of what is now Turkey. He did not want to be in Troas, but there he was. It was like being in Wichita, when you’re trying to get to Chicago.

And then God said to Paul: “Surprise! I’m changing your travel plans again. I’m taking you to a new place, a place where you and the world will be blessed. Are you ready, Paul? We’re going to Macedonia.” Paul’s response? It says he went “immediately” (v. 10). Immediately! I’m not sure I would have done that. I might have said, “But Lord, Macedonia is in Europe. Macedonia is in the opposite direction of where I’m heading. I have plans!” Fortunately, Paul was willing to change his plans. He knew that the invitation was from God. It came at night, the Bible tells us in verse 9: “During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” “Here I am, Lord,” he replied. “Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.” He went to Macedonia, a place he did not plan to visit, and the result was a thriving ministry in partnership with Lydia. It was a historic breakthrough: into Europe and eventually to Rome.

How about us? Are we willing to change our direction of travel? Are we willing to change the itinerary of our life? When we hear the invitation, “Come over to Macedonia and help us?”, do we become depressed or angry, because that was not our plan, or do we say with Paul, “I will go, Lord, if you lead me”? To put it another way: when a door is closed, do we believe that God will open a new door?

One of the best days in my life was one of my scariest days. I was standing with my wife in the hallway of a building downtown in Chicago. It was at 30 North Michigan Avenue. We were near the elevators, but I was too frightened to push the elevator button. In fact, both of us were in shock. Our doctor had just informed us with a smile: “Congratulations! You’re pregnant.” We were not smiling – not yet. Even though we wanted to have children some day, we were not feeling ready. I wanted to day to the doctor: “We need to be older. We need to be smarter.” I was like the young African American woman in *Gone with the Wind*, who said: “Lawsy, Miss Scarlett. I don’t know nothing ‘bout birthin’ babies.” Nor did I

know what to do with an already birthed baby. We were definitely scared. But after a few days we realized that the invitation to be parents was coming from a Higher Authority. As God was closing one door, the door of young adult freedom, God was opening a new door, a door that has led to joy.

What's it like to be a parent? It's like white water rafting at times. It's often tough! Years ago I received a note from a mother. She wrote: "Before I was a Mom, I ate hot meals; I had unstained clothing; I had quiet conversations on the phone. Before I was a Mom, I slept as late as I wanted. I brushed my hair and my teeth every day." She went on to describe the hard work and the messiness of motherhood. But there was more. "Before I was a Mom," she continued, "I never got gloriously happy over a simple grin. I never knew the warmth, the joy, the love, the heartache, the wonderfulment. I didn't know I was capable of feeling so much, before I was a Mom."

Where has God called you to change your travel plans? Sometimes we can see the blessings right away. At other times there are no apparent blessings. The road to Macedonia can seem unbearably painful.

A man from Pennsylvania became a quadriplegic. He was confined forever to beds and wheelchairs. But he eventually decided: "I can travel." And so he set a goal for himself: "I want to travel around the world in my wheelchair." He had a blast! One day in Tokyo he was interviewed: "What's your secret? How can you be so positive?" His reply was a classic. He said: "It's only my body that is paralyzed. The paralysis never got into my mind." He believed that when one door is closed, God will open a new door.

"But Lord, I don't want to go to Macedonia." Consider this. Leo Tolstoy flunked out of college. He was described as "both unable and unwilling to learn." But Leo Tolstoy was not defeated. The movies *Home Alone*, *E.T.*, and *Forrest Gump* were rejected by major studios. But the movie creators were not defeated. Theodore Geisel, better known as Doctor Seuss, had his first children's book rejected by 27 publishers. The 28<sup>th</sup> publisher, Vanguard Press, sold six million copies of *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*.

It's a long way to Macedonia, but if we choose to say yes, there will be glad surprises. Paul did not plan to be in Europe. His itinerary was changed. But he knew that God would be with him on the journey.

A Confederate soldier wrote these words that have become well-known. They are powerful words for me. "I asked God for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for power that I might be praised; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all people, most richly blessed." The road to Macedonia is not what we planned, but it can be most richly blessed.